

# PAST THE PATCH

CONNECTING WITH THE HUMANS  
BENEATH THE UNIFORM

**Rick**

*Off the Clock*

EDITION 7



## OFF THE CLOCK

### *Spotlighting Rick Canard*

Very few would run into a burning building for a dinner discount, or be the first on scene of a harrowing accident to secure a paycheck. For most, being a first responder is a calling born out of a desire to give back—and it doesn't magically turn off when they unbutton the uniform.

In my time at Lancaster EMS, I've had the opportunity to know a number of our providers, and in those more intimate conversations, I've been impressed—but not surprised—to find that many of them are just as deeply involved with the community off the clock as they are on. For EMT Academy Instructor, Rick Canard, he might even be more so.

### **Find A Need, Fill It**

"Find a need, fill it."—that's the motto of the longtime EMT and Navy Veteran. As a former business owner, Rick knows how to spot gaps in the community and, more importantly, how to bridge them. Born and raised in Washington, D.C., from the jump, he anticipated a career in medicine, "My mother's brother was a doctor and it was expected that I would follow in his footsteps."

After graduating high school, he set sail for Jackson to continue his education at Mississippi College. There, he began working at Hinds General Hospital in the Emergency Department, where he trained as a technician. But following a fallout with his uncle, Rick switched gears and joined the Navy, where he became a Hospital Corpsman. This kicked off a nearly 12 career in the military spanning various roles across the continental United States. But ultimately after the economic downturn of 2008, Rick settled in Lancaster County and returned back to where it all started: emergency medicine.



## Original Roots

Rick started at Lancaster EMS first as a volunteer, then a paid full-time MICU EMT—but he continued to climb, “I applied and was promoted to a leadership position as the Volunteer Coordinator.” He expanded the position to include community outreach, and in 2013, Lancaster EMS and Lancaster General Hospital (LGH) entered in an agreement for EMS providers to partner with "Super Utilizers" as Patient Care Navigators. When the contract was terminated in 2016, Rick accepted a full-time position with LGH Care Connections, but continued his service at Lancaster EMS as our residential EMT Academy Instructor.

It was during this time that his knack for identifying needs once again kicked in, “One of my unsheltered homeless patients kept having his backpack stolen while he slept, or after hiding behind bushes or dumpsters,” he reflects. “I asked myself, ‘What if they had a locker to secure their personal items?’”

That simple question would spark a nearly decade—and still counting—long journey. After Rick presented the idea at Care Connections, Lancaster General Health in 2016, it was then referred to the Lancaster County Homeless Coalition, who then sent it back to Rick for him to work on. While the Pandemic put the project on hold for a while, in March of 2023 the gears began to turn once more; and soon he was granted permission from the city to put the project—dubbed 'Lockers for the Homeless'--in motion.

## A Restoration of Humanity

Fastening lockers onto trailers is a particularly innovative design, one first developed by a nonprofit in Utah. Rick’s units can easily be moved, stored and fits securely in a parking space. A roof overhead not only protects the lockers from inclement weather, but also functions as a space to mount lights and security cameras, ensuring the utmost level of safety.

On a brisk January afternoon, Rick took me to see the lockers in person. As I clicked away on my camera, he pointed out the structure's different features, going over once more the circumstances of its beginning. Not only is a place to store personal belongings a huge convenience, it's also a small restoration of humanity. With such evident physical needs, it's easier to overlook the ones you can't put a price tag on. Rick realizes this, too. When I paused to acknowledge the power of the initiative, the conversation quickly became more personal.

"There's still such shame connected to being homeless," Rick emphasized. "You have no idea what that person's story is." Lancaster EMS works closely with the local unhoused population, especially our Community Paramedicine Program, which I've shadowed several times now. Those intimate encounters have made moments of disregard witnessed outside of work that much louder.

It can be easy to see strangers living on the street--especially those struggling with addiction--and rationalize our way out of empathy. Some common methods include boiling their situation down to a string of bad choices, or a lack of a discipline and willpower. But if we stopped to hear their stories--ones often riddled with generational trauma, financial hardship, and a lack of safe, supportive relationships--we might redefine the word 'choose'.

## The Ripple Effect of Trauma

In a study conducted by Unity Health Toronto, researchers found 90% of adults experiencing homelessness endured some form of childhood trauma. Over half of them reported four or more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), making them 17 times more likely to commit suicide than the general population. "If you had to live on the street," Rick shook his head, "you'd probably self-medicate, too."

While he's always had a roof over his head, maladaptive coping mechanisms aren't exactly foreign territory. "I'm very open with my students about my experiences," he prefaced, before revealing he had been sexually abused as a teen--a scar that snaked its way throughout his life before rearing its ugly head at nearly 40.

"It affected my whole life." With the reconciliation of his past, he found himself divorced and starting over in more ways than one. No longer being able to pour himself into being a husband, he decided to channel his energy not only into his kids, but counseling and community. In time, he began to rebuild his life, one colored by connection, compassion and agency.

## Off the Clock

Despite technically being semi-retired, Rick now finds himself busier than ever. While currently operating as a non-profit under the Lancaster County Redevelopment Fund, he will eventually need to establish a 501(C)(3) as the initiative grows--and that might be sooner rather than later. "I've already been contacted by individuals in other states looking to duplicate our efforts." His ultimate goal? To watch Lockers for the Homeless spread across the county and beyond.

It's this quality--a generosity of spirit--he ultimately hopes to instill in those who look to him for guidance, especially the cadets he leads as the Lancaster EMS EMT Academy Instructor. "In EMS," he explains, "it can be easy to lose the empathy needed to be a compassionate provider." Clocking in each shift not knowing what you're going to see, or who you're going to meet takes a toll. First responders run the very real risk of becoming numb to the job, ironically due to an excess of compassion, not a lack. Rick assures one of the best ways to stay connected to community is by volunteering.



And when it comes to the kind of leader he wants to be inside the classroom, he leaves no ambiguity, "I hope I can leave each [student] with a need to hold onto the empathy [they] bring to this position."

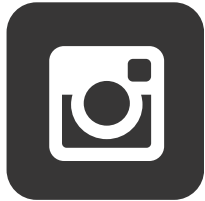
There's a quote I like to pass along to my friends when I find them leaning on my shoulder: The depth of your pain will be the height of your joy. It's a sentiment I often found myself repeating when I first entered therapy to heal my own trauma. As Rick and I rolled into the West station after our brief outing at the lockers, we talked about the beauty that can be recovery, once the brunt of the pain has passed and your new roots have found home in good soil. But not everyone is as lucky as us; and while resilience and drive certainly play a role in recuperation, it's far from the only factor. With a small nod, he expressed his gratitude in no uncertain terms, "I live a very happy, healthy, meaningful life."

Rick got his good ending. Now, he's making sure others get their's, too.





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